

64hh- Responsibility Can Free You From Suffering

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(A Summarised Transcription of a Hillside Hermitage Dhamma Talk)

The reason why understanding is hard to develop, is because in order to do so, one needs to know what must be understood. That might sound self explanatory, but the point is, understanding takes repetition. One needs to make the effort of repetitive investigation or drilling into a certain topic or theme that needs to be clarified, i.e. the theme or aspect of experience that one wants to develop clarity in regard to. In order to do that, you need to know what to look for, you need to know how to approach it and what to understand. Getting information about it is absolutely necessary, but information in itself, as vast as it can be, is not ‘understanding’. Which is something that many people would confuse; knowing a lot about something does not mean you understand it, especially when it comes down to the Nature of things, feelings, intentions, or the Nature of experience as a whole.

When it comes to practising the Dhamma, many people mystify it, as in, go after an experience of some kind of new amazing feeling which they can interpret as understanding/enlightenment, a kind of ‘intuitive wisdom’. However, if you cannot explain an experience or make it intelligible to yourself or to somebody else, you should not think you understood it. Now, of course you’re free to use your own words, so to speak, you don’t have to use already given templates of descriptions and so on. But the point is, you will still be able to convey the meaning if you understood that experience in its *nature*, and that’s the crucial factor here, the *meaning* of the experience, the meaning of whatever might have happened to you that you think was somehow worthy in your practice, in your meditation or in any other area of life for that matter. And that’s when you realise that most of the time, even things that you think you understand, upon which you act and choose to live your life, you haven’t actually understood the meaning behind, you just act, you just go along with it, i.e. it made some vague sense to you, or as the Buddha said, you will be doing these things or holding those views, simply because it pleases you, simply because it “feels” good, and that’s the sole criteria for most people. They find an idea pleasing and that’s why they defend their view and their actions based on their chosen views. Either way, there is no understanding of those things. That’s the important difference that we are trying to highlight here. Basically it’s not about the experience that you might have, it’s about understanding it. And if understanding is the focus, that’s when you realise the content of the experience doesn’t matter as much, as long as it’s wholesome, as long as it’s based on restraint and virtue, then you realise it’s the understanding of any experience which results in freedom from suffering, that matters.

The reason why this practice, given by the Buddha, the practice of *understanding* is harder than just sitting and trying to develop calmness or pleasant feeling through some practice of concentration, is because it will result initially, in causing doubt and restlessness in your mind. But that’s how you know that you are doing it properly. By working through these things, you learn to be imperturbable in the face of the thinking mind, not the other way round. You’re afraid of the thinking mind because it disturbs you, and then you try to stop the thinking, you try to concentrate on a little point so you don’t have to think about anything else. However, you need to develop strength in the face of that which wants to move you, in order to be immovable, not control the content that disturbs you. So it’s important to then obviously read the Suttas

and get the idea as to what needs to be understood. But very often, it comes down to that tedious, ambiguous, heavy drilling of your thought.

Sit down in a quiet, non-crowded environment and ask yourself, "Intention, intention, what is intention? Do I know what intention is for me, for myself, in my own experience? When I say intention, what do I refer to? Is it understood? What is it? Whatever it is, do I try to understand it, or do I just sort of float on the surface of the meaning of intention? Is the meaning vague? How would I describe my intention?"

Try writing down what your intention is and then afterwards, read that back to yourself and see if it makes any sense. If it does, then push the questions further. So, in this case, you ask, "So what is intent? What is my intention? Like now, I have the intention to be seated here and contemplate the nature of intention? What is the intention that's making me do this? What is it? Is it a fleeting thought? Well, it isn't, because I'm still seated, trying to contemplate these things. Which means that that thought is present throughout these more particular actions that I'm doing, that I'm trying to contemplate. I remain seated, I still haven't switched on my phone, I still haven't opened my door to the world. So, all these other things I do are on the basis of a simultaneously present more general intention, which is to ponder on the nature of intention, or the nature of feeling or the nature of five aggregates". So how else would you then describe that presently enduring intention? Is it a thought? Is it some sort of perception? It is, because if it weren't, you wouldn't be able to talk about it, you wouldn't be able to designate it even for yourself, let alone for others. So, it's a peripheral thought, which in this case, I have the intention to sit down and contemplate.

You don't have to keep it in front of your mind, as in, while you're sitting and contemplating. You don't have to keep saying to yourself, "I want to sit, I want to sit, I want to contemplate, that's my intention." No, because these actions already carry that intention. That's how intentions work. That's why I keep saying the most important thing for somebody who wants to start the practice or somebody who's already developing it, is to develop full transparency in regard to present enduring motivations behind the smallest of actions. That's how you get to discern the fundamental aspect of wholesome or unwholesome, good or bad, healthy or unhealthy, and especially to discern where your actions are rooted. Because if you're not aware of this peripheral thought of your intention that directs all of your particular actions, while it endures, you're not aware of where that action or those actions are rooted.

Intention is wholesome or unwholesome or neutral, but for practical sake, just look for wholesome and unwholesome, if it's unwholesome avoid it, if it's wholesome, don't try to deny it or fear it, just let it be, let it endure. Either way, they arise on their own, but your responsibility is not to try to prevent them from arising, your responsibility is to prevent yourself from acting out of it. So as I said, even if you're a beginner, sit down, quietly, in a semi-protected environment, undistracted, and question the things you're doing and things you want to do. Bring them forward to your mind, and then think about why you want to act, "Oh, it's because of this and that. Well, why is this and that a reason for me doing these things? Why did I choose that to be the reason?"

It's always on you, intention is always your responsibility. That's why the Buddha said that every action is an intention. You can't commit an action without having it rooted in an intention. And that's what "beings are

owners of their actions" means. Only you, nobody else, which means you are fundamentally always responsible for what you choose to do. That's not negotiable or optional.

"Beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions, born of their actions, related through their actions, and have their actions as their arbitrator. Action is what differentiates beings in terms of baseness & excellence." - [Mn135](#)

Ask yourself, "What is the intention? When I say intention, intention? What am I referring to in this experience as a whole?". We have established it's a sort of ambiguous peripheral thought, an idea or context of all these little things that you are doing. You don't have to keep staring at little things that you're doing in order to discern intention. Why? Because the intention always comes first structurally, simultaneously the intentions and actions are present. But intention is deeper, so to speak, it's not that you have the intention and then the actions. No, you have intentions and you have your environment in regard to which you have intentions. But that's when you recognise that these intentions determine the course of my action, and for that I'm responsible for saying yes or no to them.

So, we established that an intention in the most fundamental, most basic, the most straightforward description, is a thought, a right thought or a bad thought. You have a thought that gives the context to your present actions. But if you're unaware of that thought, it means you are unaware of the nature of it, whether the nature is wholesome or unwholesome. And if that is the case, that means you will not know whether your actions are rooted in good or bad. Through avoiding responsibility for your intentions, you end up avoiding responsibility for your actions down the line. That's why the five or eight precepts, i.e. virtue, always has to come first.

You have to start narrowing down your 'avoidance of responsibility'. Someone who doesn't keep the precepts, he avoids responsibility left and right and there is no base for Dhamma whatsoever. If you start keeping the precepts, that's where you create a basis for progress in Dhamma. You might avoid responsibility here and there, and until you invest enough work into that, and rectify that, at least you will not avoid responsibility past this point, past the five precepts or eight, and so on. You start rounding up that avoidance of responsibility for your actions, and that can then bring further clarity to the fact that your responsibility goes even beyond that, that you are responsible for welcoming the thought of greed, the thought of aversion, ill will, cruelty, and the thought of distraction. That's why the Buddha would say, the noble disciple, the one with the right view, who has developed clarity in regard to the nature of his intentions, all he has to do is not tolerate and not delight and not welcome the unwholesome thoughts. All he has to do is not be ignorant and distract himself from wholesome thoughts.

So when unwholesome/unhealthy intentions arise, he's aware of it, he understands it, and all he needs to do is abstain from doing anything on account of it. He knows, "I will not welcome this and I will not entertain this thought to stay for even a second longer." If that attitude is present, it will be impossible for him to act out of it. The only way you can act out of unwholesome intentions, is if you ignore that they are unwholesome because as soon as you're aware of their unwholesomeness, you cannot act, it's mutually

exclusive. You must ignore the unwholesome in order to act out of it. And that's exactly why ignorance is the most blameworthy, it's a fundamental prerequisite for anything unwholesome.

“The Blessed One said this: Bhikkhus, before my awakening, while I was still only seeking awakening, it occurred to me: ‘Suppose that I divide my thoughts into two classes. Then I set on one side thoughts of sensual desire, thoughts of ill will, and thoughts of cruelty, and I set on the other side thoughts of renunciation, thoughts of non-ill will, and thoughts of non-cruelty.

“As I abided thus, diligent, ardent, and resolute, a thought of sensual desire (*and a thought of either ill-will or cruelty*) arose in me. I understood thus: ‘This thought of sensual desire has arisen in me. This leads to my own affliction, to others’ affliction, and to the affliction of both; it obstructs wisdom, causes difficulties, and leads away from Nibbāna.’ - When I considered: ‘This leads to my own affliction,’ it subsided in me; when I considered: ‘This leads to others’ affliction,’ it subsided in me; when I considered: ‘This leads to the affliction of both,’ it subsided in me; when I considered: ‘This obstructs wisdom, causes difficulties, and leads away from Nibbāna,’ it subsided in me. Whenever a thought of sensual desire arose in me, I abandoned it, removed it, and did away with it.

....

“Bhikkhus, whatever a bhikkhu frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of his mind. If he frequently thinks and ponders upon thoughts of sensual desire, he has abandoned the thought of renunciation to cultivate the thought of sensual desire, and then his mind inclines to thoughts of sensual desire. If he frequently thinks and ponders upon thoughts of ill will...upon thoughts of cruelty, he has abandoned the thought of non-cruelty to cultivate the thought of cruelty, and then his mind inclines to thoughts of cruelty.

“Just as in the last month of the rainy season, in the autumn, when the crops thicken, a cowherd would guard his cows by constantly tapping and poking them on this side and that with a stick to check and curb them. Why is that? Because he sees that he could be flogged, imprisoned, fined, or blamed if he let them stray into the crops. So too I understood, in unwholesome states there is danger, degradation, and defilement, and in wholesome states the blessing of renunciation, the aspect of cleansing.

“As I abided thus, diligent, ardent, and resolute, a thought of renunciation arose in me. I understood thus: ‘This thought of renunciation has arisen in me. This does not lead to my own affliction, or to others’ affliction, or to the affliction of both; it aids wisdom, does not cause difficulties, and leads to Nibbāna. If I think and ponder upon this thought even for a night, even for a day, even for a night and day, I see nothing to fear from it. But with excessive thinking and pondering I might tire my body, and when the body is tired, the mind becomes strained, and when the mind is strained, it is far from composure.’ So I steadied, stilled, unified and composed my mind internally. Why is that? So that my mind should not be strained....” - [Mn19](#)

Avijja-Ignorance it's not some sort of metaphysical and mysterious cloud of unknowing that deludes you, it's this very act of ignoring your responsibility, avoiding transparency, avoiding the recognition of your choice in regards to the present intention. That's ignorance and that's how you carry it, you perpetuate it through your own actions. Ignorant actions perpetuate ignorance because of which actions are ignorant. It's a vicious circle, but you can break through it if you start accepting that responsibility, if you start looking at the motivation behind your action, and develop clarity in regard to its nature.

As I said, ask yourself, "What is the nature of intention? When I say intention what do I refer to? Do I refer to a specific or general thought, to a mood, a feeling, what is it?" The main problem is not necessarily not being able to give an answer right away. The main problem is not even attempting to think about it in the first place, which is what most people do because initially it's so ambiguous. It's going to take a lot of effort because we are used to just being focused on the content/positive aspect as opposed to the negative, i.e. the background context. So now you have to be discerning the *nature* in regard to the present content. That's why this kind of thinking requires constant drilling/repetition, and the prerequisites of virtue and sense restraint in order for understanding to take root. Otherwise, it just won't happen, you will just be floating from one content to another.

You can pick up any theme, like the aggregate of feeling, for example, and ask yourself: "What do I feel right now? What is the nature of the feeling? How would I describe it? Is it an idea? If I say, "Oh, I feel light, heavy, etc.," are those feelings or are those perceptions of lightness and so on? Feelings, as the suttas say, are pleasant, unpleasant, or neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant. So all these perceptions I'm talking about, I feel light, I feel heavy, I feel this, I feel like that, etc. Where are they rooted, presently? Is it pleasant, unpleasant or neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant?..." That's how you start clarifying the feeling. You realise that most often, things we think feelings are, are actually perceptions, thoughts and concepts. And you will be talking about those things as your feelings, for as long as you don't make the effort to think about what the actual feeling is.

You can see that the practice of Right understanding, the practice of developing the Right view, is not about building some intricate system of special meditation techniques that will then culminate in release of all bad energy and involve a mystical experience, through practice and effort. It's about undoing the state of a *puthujjana*, the state of an ignorant ordinary person who is a prey to suffering. That state is the starting point for everyone. It's not about building something new on top of the state of an ignorant *puthujjana*, it's about removing everything that makes you a *puthujjana*. That's how you become a *sotapanna* free from suffering.

Lack of understanding, replaced with understanding, means that all the wrong views are gone. Lack of understanding in regard to what? In regards to the nature of your experience, the five aggregates, in regards to the suffering and freedom from it, in regard to any topic from the suttas. Fully understand those themes that matter and you would have then undone your ignorance that was maintaining your ignorant state of a *puthujjana*.

In terms of meditation, you don't have to start with some complex topics. Just pick up things/themes that you think you know and then really investigate them. By that, I mean, contemplate them rightly, not just think about the information you have about it. Pick up things you know, and see whether you really know them. Don't pull any punches, don't be afraid of what you might discover. Dedicate yourself to clarifying the meaning, which means make yourself open to the possibility of doubt, which can be very unpleasant. And the way you're going to deal with that doubt will be self-evident if you have your virtue established beforehand. If you've been living virtuously and you recognise the necessity of that virtue, that will take care of the unpleasantness of doubt and restlessness and so on. But you have to go through with it. The longer a person who wants to practice Dhamma, avoids this, the harder it's going to be to do it later.

Ask yourself about the things you think you understood. Whatever it is, whatever sutta you read and you think you made sense of, question it or even ask yourself what do you want to get out of the practice? Do you want peace? How would you define that peace? Do you have clarity in regard to what peace means? What does it mean? Peaceful means non-disturbed. Okay, so take it a step further. What is the disturbance then? How are you disturbed? Are you disturbed when you experience things you don't want to experience? Are you disturbed when you don't experience things you want to experience? What's in common to any form of disturbance? What's in common is, it is suffering, it's unpleasant. If disturbance is not unpleasant, it wouldn't be a disturbance. So, you want peace, which is freedom from disturbance, which means peace is freedom from unpleasant feeling, freedom from suffering. Peace equals absence of suffering altogether.

Now, of course, that makes sense. But by going through these motions of repetitive self-reflexive contemplating, you're actually clarifying things layer by layer and next time when something bothers you, when you suffer on account of it, you will realise, "Well, I'm not automatically disturbed by things that bother me, I'm only disturbed when I start suffering on account of things that bother me, so peace is not, not having anything come my way. Peace is about not being disturbed, not suffering on account of whatever comes my way." Ultimately, sickness, ageing and death will come your way, that's not negotiable. So these little layers that you will be undoing through reflection. That's all that matters. That's how you practice gradually, bit by bit.

When the Buddha says that the root of suffering is your own craving, not the conditions in regard to which you crave, then you can realise that you're affected by disturbance of any kind because you disturb yourself, nobody or nothing else does that to you. That can sound quite blunt in a way, but at the same time, it's the best possible news you can receive because if suffering were truly rooted in circumstances or other people's actions, you can't control that, you can't even access that and therefore you wouldn't be able to free yourself from it. But it isn't rooted in external circumstances, and that's the good news.

The Buddha's teaching should be considered as a very strict form of optimism. It's recognising the problem and knowing exactly what to do about it. Its recognising that the problem of you being disturbed by things which make you non-peaceful, lies in you craving for the present pleasant feeling, to stay longer or simply to stay, craving for the present unpleasant feeling to go away, as soon as possible, and craving for the neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling to be ignored or not to be experienced. Practically, those are the three attitudes that perpetuate your liability to suffering.

In order to stop craving in regard to these feelings, you have to learn how to discern these feelings for what they are. Which brings us to the questions we brought up earlier, “Feeling, feeling, what is feeling? When I say feeling, what am I referring to? What is that phenomenon? What is that thing, present in my experience as a whole, that I designate by saying feeling?”. How would you describe your pleasant feeling? Don’t jump to conclusions, just pause, ask yourself the question, let the question endure for as long as it will and if your mind starts wandering away, ask the question again and then try to think about it a little bit more, but don’t rush into an answer. Why? Because you don’t want to be producing the answer, you want to be discerning it. Why? Because that present feeling is present. You don’t need to answer it in order for that feeling to be there. The fact that you were able to designate it means it’s there. It’s your preconceived notions about the feeling, which obscures your understanding of its nature. That’s what [Mūlapariyāyasutta](#) is all about, it describes all the conceivings that you do on account of the arisen experience, not before the arisen experience. It’s about clearing out your “conceivings” and discerning things in their *nature*. If you can discern the nature of the presently enduring feeling, then you will be unable to crave it.
